

## **Teaming Up with the Passaic River Community: How Community Leadership Guided the EPA to a Successful Cleanup of Contaminated Sediment from the Lower Passaic River**

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In June 2008, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency signed an agreement with Tierra Solutions, Inc (the responsible party) to remove 200,000 cubic yards of the most concentrated inventory of dioxin-contaminated sediment in the Lower Passaic River. This historic action is one step in a multi-step process to remediate contamination associated with the Diamond Alkali Superfund Site in Newark, New Jersey. Work will be carried out in two phases. Phase 1 involved dredging 40,000 cubic yards of the most highly contaminated sediment within a sheet pile enclosure to prevent the movement of resuspended sediment from the area, dewatering of sediment and off-site treatment and disposal. After years of careful planning and consultation with the community, Phase 1 got underway in 2011 and is scheduled to conclude in Fall 2012. Phase 2 will involve dredging 160,000 cubic yards within sheet pile enclosures in areas adjacent to the Phase 1 area with placement in a confined disposal facility. The timing and nature of the 2008 agreement were met with surprise by some community members and stakeholders. When the EPA asked the public to get involved in the Phase 1 Removal Action and comment on project plans, feelings of hope and satisfaction over something tangible finally getting done to clean the River were mixed with feelings of distrust and frustration among some. In order to reconcile those mixed feelings and create an effective working relationship with the public and other stakeholders, the barriers, real and perceived, between the government, the responsible party and the community had to be acknowledged, discussed and broken down.

As the largest, industrial section of the City of Newark, the Ironbound suffers the cumulative impact of pollution from multiple contaminating sites - the largest incinerator in the state of New Jersey, heavy truck traffic to and from Port Newark and old industrial plants. The community organized more than 25 years ago to develop strategies to confront these health hazards. The Ironbound is also the most densely populated ward in the City and it lacks parks and open space to provide relief for neighborhood residents. The Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC) has worked for the last 20 plus years to acquire waterfront property along the River in the Ironbound community to be used for recreational and educational space for neighborhood residents who traditionally have had the lowest amount of open space in the City of Newark. At the same time, the cleanup of the River has been an important community priority. Within the neighborhood, the Diamond Shamrock Company left a lethal legacy of dioxin, a byproduct of producing Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.

The last few years have seen enormous achievements in addressing the issues. ICC, in conjunction with the County of Essex, helped acquire 12.5 acres of land along the River that the County developed as a park and recreational fields. This summer athletic teams were created to accommodate the recreational interests of youngsters and ICC also initiated environmental programs, including community gardening, recycling and composting, for youngsters from 6 to

14 years old from diverse communities in the neighborhood. Additionally, under the leadership of ICC, the community with assistance from EPA organized a Community Advisory Group (CAG) in October 2009 to participate in the planning process for the Phase I Removal Action. The EPA procured and funded a neutral facilitator who was interviewed and recommended by the CAG leadership to EPA. The CAG is a voluntary, independent group of individuals and organizations that represents the broad community interests affected by the Diamond Alkali Superfund Site. It selects its own members, sets meeting agendas, and establishes its mission and operating procedures. EPA, federal partner agencies, and the State of New Jersey participate in the CAG meetings as ex-officio or liaison "non voting" members. The potentially responsible parties attend most of the CAG meetings, often giving presentations at the invite of the CAG or request of EPA. The EPA provides advice to the CAG leadership on upcoming activities and schedules to assist with meeting planning and to ensure early, meaningful community input. The meetings are interactive and open to the public. One of the primary concerns of the CAG was to ensure that the local community that had suffered the negative impact of the dioxin pollution received benefits from the cleanup.

It takes a team effort to plan for and hold the monthly CAG meetings. A great deal of communication, coordination and administrative support by the CAG co-chairs, facilitator and EPA is necessary to ensure that the deliberations and advice on cleanup decisions are transparent, meaningful and early enough in the process to enhance the quality of the project and minimize potential impacts to the community during cleanup. A direct, candid approach was used in the CAG meetings to explain the things that were governed by regulation and those that could be influenced by the community. This approach went a long way towards the success of the cleanup by creating an atmosphere of sharing that resulted in specific feedback on design elements from small things such as edits to site signage to big things such as the Community Health and Safety Plan. One of the biggest success stories was an idea shared by ICC regarding their interest in the creation of local jobs from the cleanup to serve as a pilot program that could be used to ensure local participation in work crews when larger sections of the River are scheduled for cleanup. This concept required the cooperation of Tierra and their contractors, as well as a lot of work by ICC and the CAG, to recruit, select, train and hire local residents. This led to the very successful implementation of the Superfund Job Training Initiative, the first use of this EPA-funded program in EPA Region 2, which resulted in the training and employment of 15 local residents during the cleanup. Beyond the CAG meetings, the EPA had an open door relationship with community, business and environmental organizations. Conference calls and face-to-face meetings were frequently held to answer questions and provide updates throughout the project as well as to obtain feedback and learn insights on how to handle community issues.

The EPA-CAG team changed the level of communication among all the involved parties and the community. The CAG's facilitator provided the perfect avenue for this communication. Although a lot of work had to be done early on to deal with the frustrations of a very long history at this site, the results in terms of community acceptance and improvements to the project were invaluable. Frequent communication and early involvement in design of the cleanup among all parties was essential to the success of Phase I and will continue to have lasting effects on future Passaic River projects.